Museum Notes

No. 7

INFORMATION SHEETS
from the
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

Newfoundland Traditional Furniture

From the time of earliest settlement, the craft of furniture making was practised and traditionally transmitted in rural Newfoundland. In the late eighteenth century furniture was beginning to be imported and some was made locally by professional craftspeople such as carpenters, coopers and wheelwrights. Most of the furniture used by people in outport Newfoundland, however, continued to be handmade until the early part of the twentieth century. Up until that time most rural areas of the province were very isolated and people had to work hard to make a living — few Newfoundlanders could afford the luxury of buying furniture.

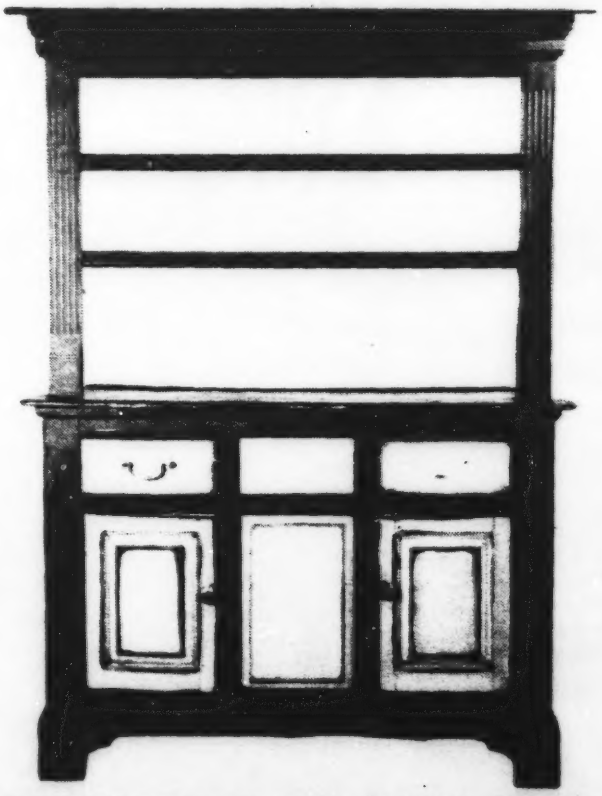
In the 1940s more and more people began to work for wages. As cash became available, Newfoundlanders frequently discarded their old homemade furniture in favour of factory made pieces. Many locally made items were thrown onto the dump or axed for firewood by people who complained that these furnishings reminded them of hard times.

Fortunately, some furniture was saved because it was removed from the houses and stored in workshops, twine lofts and root cellars.

As well, some rural Newfoundlanders still live and make-do with furnishings fashioned by earlier generations of their families. If closely examined, these pieces can tell us a great deal about the ingenuity and imagination of rural Newfoundlanders during the early days of our province's history.

STYLES

Rural furniture continued to be fashioned after eighteenth century English styles until the early twentieth century. The bracket foot, a characteristic of both the Queen Anne and the Chippendale styles, was copied on case furniture such as cupboards, blanket boxes, chests of drawers and commode-type washstands. An early nineteenth century pine dresser with bracket feet was found discarded in a



Pine kitchen dresser. Keels, Bonavista Bay. Early nineteenth century. Pl. 1

marshy area in Keels, Bonavista Bay (Pl. 1). The centre drawer is a dummy and the Chippendale style ball and ball handle originally attached to it is now missing. It was first painted white and blue. Later part of the stiles were cut away, the facings of the shelf edges removed, and glazed doors added to bring the piece in line with current fashion. The dresser has now been restored to its original condition.

The late eighteenth century Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles featuring simple straight lines and a minimum of carved decoration were often imitated and interpreted. The most easily recognized and frequently appearing characteristic is the square tapering leg often seen on Hepplewhite furniture. This leg style, which sometimes terminated in spade feet, was widely used on tables and chairs and survived in outport furniture because it was relatively easy to shape with ordinary hand tools.

The early nineteenth century Regency or Empire style, which was inspired by the heavy Empire style of Napoleonic France, also became popular and influenced the shape of rural Newfoundland furniture. This influence is most evident in the overhanging drawers found in the top tier of many sideboards, chests of drawers, and even late nineteenth century commode-type washstands and the lyre-curved ends frequently seen on sofas.

During the Victorian era when furniture in North America and Europe was being factory produced, some Newfoundlanders using hand tools continued to imitate the earlier simple designs. More ambitious individuals, however, interpreted the commercial furniture with its ornate carvings, fretwork, and turnery. Home made foot-operated lathes and jig saws were sometimes used by these innovative craftsmen to produce such embellishments.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the locally made furniture still exhibited characteristics of both earlier and contemporary styles. A twentieth century case piece might have bracket feet of the eighteenth century tradition, an overhanging top tier of the early nineteenth century Regency style, and a backboard in the shape of a lyre, an early twentieth century feature of the factory produced furniture made during the reign of Edward VII.

Sometimes the unusual influenced the shape and the decoration of the local product. A good example is a curious bed made by Kenneth Monks in King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, circa 1896 (Pl. 2). Although it is similar to the mass produced iron and brass bedsteads fashionable at that time, this bed was constructed from local birch and finished with black and gold paint. The influence of the church is evident in the American print depicting the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, the gothic arch surmounting the headboard and the quatrefoil fretwork.

Headboard of a birch bed made by Kenneth Monks in King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, around 1896. Pl. 2

The size and proportions of each piece of furniture were usually determined by its location in the home. This was most apparent in two rooms in particular; the bedroom and the parlour. Bedrooms were often small. In fact, in a salt box type house, front bedrooms were often not more than 3m x 3m and rear bedrooms were considerably smaller, so that bedroom furniture was frequently made shallow, perhaps to fit behind a door. Conversely, parlours were often spacious and accommodated large sideboards which were used to display ornamental glassware and dishes.

WOODS

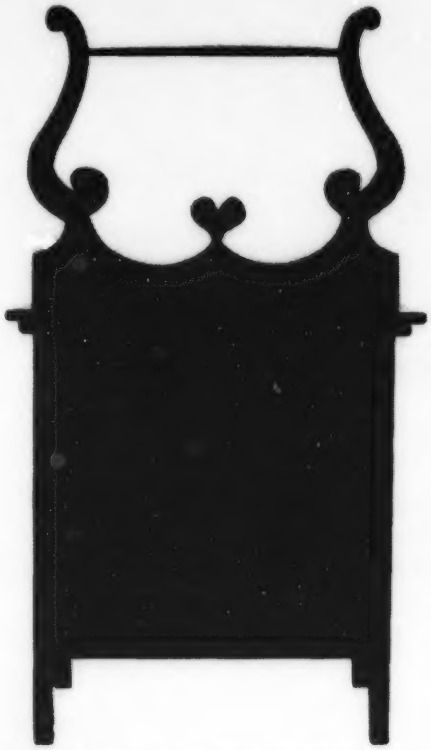
Early rural furniture was made from local wood, chiefly pine and birch. Birch, a hardwood, was selected for its strength; it can be turned on a lathe without splitting. It was used principally for the legs of tables, the legs, backs, rungs and spindles of chairs, and the posts of beds. Pine was the most popular, especially for chests of drawers and other case pieces, because it is a straight-grained softwood easily worked with simple hand tools. When pine was not available, spruce, fir, and tamarack were used, even though these woods are of coarse of uneven grain, split easily, and are difficult to work.

By the nineteenth century imported pine, birch and maple were sometimes used for furniture making as were boards from demolished houses and

outbuildings. In fact, parts of older furniture such as legs, rungs, spindles and posts were occasionally incorporated into new pieces. This use of odds and ends for furniture making does not always indicate poverty. Sometimes it merely attests to the scarcity of more suitable materials or demonstrates Newfoundlanders' perennial dislike for discarding anything that might be put to some good use. During the late nineteenth century Albert Rodgers, a coffin maker in Harbour Grace, Conception Bay, saved a rough hemlock shipping crate and skillfully turned it into a chest of drawers (Pl. 3.) Pine boards were nailed over the rough wood to form the top of the two ends of the chest. The framework for the drawers was constructed in the open side of the box and the drawers were carefully made using dovetail joints. Only the left end was decorated with a reeded diamond design because the chest was made for a particular corner in a bedroom where the right end would not be seen. The chest was originally painted red. A fake-grained finish was applied over the original paint at some later date.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, outport people saved packing crates of pine, spruce, fir or even tropical woods for making furniture. Although the boards from these crates often varied greatly in quality, they were already cut, reasonably seasoned, and cost nothing. Because many of these boards were thin they were particularly suitable for making drawer bottoms and panels. Furniture from this era has many examples of backs, panels and inner parts made from these boards. The labelling and stencilling of local or foreign manufacturers and merchants can often be discovered on the hidden surfaces of such pieces.

Chest of drawers made from a shipping crate. Harbour Grace, Conception Bay, late nineteenth century. Pl. 3



Washstand. Salmon Cove, Conception Bay, Early twentieth century. Pl. 4

CONSTRUCTION

Rural Newfoundlanders generally imitated the methods of furniture construction practised by commercial furniture makers. For example, the stiles and rails that formed the basic framework of case furniture and doors were nearly always joined by mortice and tenon joints secured by wooden pins. In some well-made pieces, corner blocks were glued to the inside of the basic structure for strengthening. Panels were left free to expand and contract as the wood "breathed".

Frequently a Newfoundlander's ingenuity is demonstrated by how he solved, in his own way the problems of putting a particular piece of furniture together. For instance, the sides of case furniture and doors were occasionally made from solid boards which had panels simulated by the application of mouldings or by the carving away of the centre of the board so that the edges stood out in relief. Chests of drawers, cupboards and sideboards were often made without backs. After all, when they were placed against a wall, who would know? The corners of drawers were usually joined by nails rather than by dovetail joints. The ends of the drawer front were cut to half thickness so that they overlapped the ends of the sides. In most cases, the nails were driven through the sides of the drawer

Pine wall box with painted decoration. Bareneed, Conception Bay. Late nineteenth century. Pl. 5

into the end grain of the drawer front.

FINISHES, HARDWARE AND DECORATIONS

After the furniture had been constructed, it was usually painted or grained to resemble the woods — mahogany, rosewood, walnut or oak — used in commercially produced furniture. Occasionally outport furniture, especially late nineteenth century and early twentieth century examples, was given a dark stain and a clear shellac finish. Kitchen and bedroom furniture was frequently painted in bright colours, chiefly red or blue. Most graining was not done to produce an accurate imitation of wood grain but rather for decorative effect, and seldom resembled any known wood.

Generally, the later the construction, the more lavish was the decoration. As the nineteenth century progressed, furniture became more and more adorned with turnery, carving and other detail. By the beginning of the twentieth century many items were profusely decorated.

The influence of factory-made furniture can clearly be seen in the form and decoration of folk furniture. An early twentieth century commode-type washstand from Salmon Cove, Conception Bay was made with few frills (Pl. 4). This home made piece, however, shows the marriage of an early twentieth century style inspired by factory produced furniture with a traditional folk decoration, the heart.

CONCLUSION

It is a mistake to evaluate Newfoundland furniture by standards used to judge that made elsewhere by furniture makers or in factories. Furniture created by Newfoundlanders for their own use clearly demonstrates not only the skills and peculiarities of these individuals, but also reflects the way of life, the ideals and aspirations of a people. Furthermore, it shows that Newfoundlanders not only managed to survive in a harsh environment in semi-isolation but lived enthusiastically and acted upon their environment with imagination.

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NOTE
This is a condensed version of the author's "Newfoundland Outport Furniture: An Interpretation" which appeared in Material History Bulletin II National Museum of Man; Fall, 1980. Photography is by Antonia McGrath. Part of the field research for this article was funded by a Canada Council Explorations Grant.

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